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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001018

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: BERRI OFFERS GUARANTEE NOT TO TOPPLE
GOVERNMENT -- FOR A PRICE

REF: BEIRUT 1000

Classified By: Charge William Grant. Reason: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) According to a new proposal presented by a close aide of Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, the opposition finally will provide March 14 with the long sought-after guarantee not to resign from a national unity government. In return, the opposition wants its say in who will be Lebanon's next president. March 14 has not reacted yet. End summary.

A GUARANTEE FOR A GUARANTEE

12. (C) Following the Ambassador's July 5 meeting with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri (reftel), senior Berri aide Ali Hamdan called the Ambassador with news that the opposition had a new proposal to resolve the ongoing political impasse that it wanted to communicate to March 14 via the Embassy. Pol/Econ Chief met with Hamdan on July 6. Reversing March 8's previous position, Hamdan said the opposition (including Hizballah and Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement) would provide the elusive guarantee not to resign from a national unity government and to participate in all cabinet sessions until a new president is in place. Hamdan confirmed this would be a public guarantee that could be made in a joint press statement or however March 14 wanted to present it.

13. (C) In return, however, the opposition wanted a (public) guarantee from March 14 that the two sides would elect a consensus presidential candidate. Hamdan claimed the opposition doesn't care whether the president is from the March 14, March 8, or Aoun bloc, but it has to be a candidate on which all parties agree. Hamdan, who will be one of two Amal representatives at this weekend's talks in Paris, optimistically said that if March 14 accepts the offer, there will be no need to go to France. Hamdan asked the Embassy to relay the offer to March 14, which we did in a July 9 meeting with Nader Hariri, advisor and cousin of Saad Hariri, who immediately called Saad in Saudi Arabia (no reactions available at this time).

DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

14. (C) Pol/Econ Chief pressed Hamdan for the implications of such an agreement on the many other contentious issues, i.e.,

the number of ministers allocated to each bloc, portfolios, the opposition's intentions to "review" decrees passed by the Siniora government since the November 2006 resignation of six opposition ministers, whether or not issues previously agreed during last year's National Dialogue would be revisited, and, finally, possible presidential candidates. Hamdan shrugged off these issues as details he was confident the parties could sort out once the two overarching "principles" were in place. The important thing was to build an atmosphere of trust that allows the two sides to work together and creates a better environment for compromise.

15. (C) When asked about the purpose of reviewing existing decrees, Hamdan said the opposition merely wanted to ensure that no decrees were passed -- such as the ill-fated decree eliminating Good Friday as one of Lebanon's national holidays -- that didn't make sense. The decree requesting the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, he stressed, would not be touched. Hamdan declined to name any potential presidential candidates, saying only that he was sure "Berri has people in mind." The important thing was consensus, he repeated. Hamdan also claimed the opposition had no intention of revisiting issues already agreed during the spring 2006 national dialogue.

PRIZE IS THE PRESIDENCY

16. (C) Comment. Until now, Berri's mantra has been primarily focused on a national unity government. With this new offer, Berri and his March 8 allies seem to be setting their sights on the larger prize: the presidency. Instead of March 8 wielding the ability to topple a national unity government

BEIRUT 00001018 002 OF 002

(whose shelf-life is only a few months), securing agreement on the presidency would guarantee the next president (whose term is six years) is someone of March 8's liking. As it stands now, March 14 theoretically could elect a president solely of its own choosing, without March 8 support. By securing March 14's guarantee on a consensus candidate, the March 8 opposition essentially would gain a veto over any candidate March 14 proposes. End comment.
GRANT